

The First Book Review is the Hardest to Write

January 22, 2007

Dear Mrs. Kinningham,

Over the past year, I have experienced lots of good lessons in my schoolwork. I have noticed that some of the lessons helped me learn more about reading and writing than others. In order to understand what kind of reader and writer I have become this year, I am writing to let you know how some of my experiences in fourth grade have helped me prepare for your class next year.

purpose

*develops
the connection
between
literacy
skills*

My fourth grade teacher, Miss Westberry, explained to the class early in the year that "literacy" means reading and writing and how we use language to communicate. I thought that was pretty interesting. One of the best "literacy" experiences I have had this year is preparing an oral book report about the book HOLES to present in front of my class. I learned how to write better, so I could turn a plain old book report into an interesting book review. I then used my book review in my portfolio this year, because I thought it was one of the best pieces I have ever written.

analysis

insight

If you want to get your students interested in learning, Mrs. Kinningham, you have to give them interesting projects to work on. I know that even though we will not do a portfolio next year (at least not the same way we did this year), I am sure that we will be doing a lot of reading and writing. I would like to recommend that you let us choose good books to read like HOLES and let us do interesting writing projects like book reviews.

*addresses
needs of
audience*

reflection

I first chose HOLES to read because I had read another book by Louis Sachar that I liked very much. In this story, the main character Stanley Yelnats goes to a jail camp because he has been accused of stealing tennis shoes. He has to dig holes in the desert every day that he is there. His friends at the camp tell Stanley that the first hole is the hardest to dig. Of course, the next day, they tell him the second hole is the hardest to dig, and

*specific
support*

every day after that it's the same story. From the first part of the story when Stanley was accused of stealing the tennis shoes, I was hooked, and I knew my book project was going to be fun.

logical
transitional
element

After we finished reading our books, Miss Westberry asked us to report on the book in front of the class. I had to prepare careful notes about my thoughts on HOLES, and I had to practice speaking in front of a group. I made my little sister listen to my speech as I practiced, so I wouldn't be so nervous when I finally got to class. Because I knew the book really well, I wasn't as nervous as I thought I would be.

describes
own
strategy

This wasn't a regular book report, though. This report was special because we had to make notes about what questions we thought the class would ask us about the book. To do this, I had to think hard about what my classmates might wonder. "What was my favorite part of the book?" (the suspense when Zero was lost in the desert). "Who was my favorite character?" (Stanley Yelnats, of course). From thinking about these kinds of questions, I learned how to think about what my audience of possible readers might want to know about the story.

analysis

After the oral report, Miss Westberry explained how we would take what we had learned and write a book review. I ended up using my written book review in my portfolio. It's very clear to me that this project influenced my writing growth more than anything else I did this year.

reflection

A book report and a book review are two very different things. A book report simply reports facts about a book. A book review persuades readers to want to read the book (or not). In learning to write the book review, I learned a lot about how to influence my audience. I titled my review "The First Hole is the Hardest to Dig" to get the reader wondering what in the world my review was about. By adding interesting details and not giving too much of the story away, I hooked my reader into wanting to read my review. By focusing on how the story of Kissin' Kate made readers enjoy two stories in one book, I persuaded the reader to want to learn more about Kissin' Kate and the holes in the desert. I wrote to suggest that the Kissin' Kate story and the myth of the yellow-bellied lizard made everything in the book make sense in the end (I did this without giving too much away). "It's all about the reader," Miss Cole says. I think she knows what she is talking about.

specific
thorough
support

supports
claims
about
self

analyzes
own
strengths

By learning from my oral report how to figure out what questions a reader might have, I was able to think about the audience when I was writing my review. I think this made my writing MUCH better because I had never thought so much about what anybody other than the teacher might think about my writing. I got so involved with my HOLES book review, that I almost forgot it was for school. From learning how to speak about the book during my oral report to learning to write about the story to convince other people to read it, I have become a better reader and writer.

Communicates
effectively
with
audience

Mrs. Kinningham, I am looking forward to being in your class next year, but I want you to know one thing that is for certain. We kids like to learn when the teacher makes it fun. We can learn to become better readers and writers by doing fun projects like the book report/book review project. Just like the gang told Stanley that the first hole was the hardest to dig, I think the first book review is the hardest to write. I learned from it, though, and next year I will be able to show you just how much I have learned.

Have a good summer, Mrs. Kinningham.

Your soon-to-be student,
J. W.